FOR YOUR INFORMATIO TL 1108

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My visit to East Timor

On behalf of the WCC I attended the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches of Indonesia in Surabaya on the 23 October 1989 along with the other members of the PGI Roundtable. The official opening ceremony was held by Mr. Suharto, the President of the Republic of Indonesia, and in the afternoon we were gathered in a protocol PGI Assembly at a naval military camp in Surabaya where on behalf of WCC I extended my warm greetings to the churches and people of Indonesia.

After this official meeting I went directly from Surabaya to East Timor with Dr. Willi Toisuta, Rector of the Satya Wacana Christian University, Jenny Toisuta, the project coordinator of the East Timor Students, and Dr. Joachim Fischer, the EZE consultant in Indonesia. At our arrival on 24th October afternoon in Dili Mr. Santos Baptista, a graduate from the Satya Wacana University, met us at the airport. We had been registered by the East Timor security forces but Mr Mario Carrascalao, the Governor of East Timor, cleared our records.

Although the Indonesian Government declared as from 1st October 1989 that East Timor is totally opened for foreigners their official registration upon arrival at the Dili airport is still required. Our visit's main purpose was to see the development of our CICAWRS project which is carried out in cooperation with the Satya Wacana University: the East Timor students and graduates after graduation return to their original homeland and commit themselves in the development of projects of this island.
This agricultural small-oriented-size project in East Timor has been most faithfully developed by the initiative and engagement of the graduates and some of the non graduates of the Satya Wacana University. We visited the community centre in the Manbara District of the Liquica Regency and were much impressed by the modelling of the small agricultural land; in fact, this model has been widely and successfully introduced during the last 3 years in the island.

Along with project area visits we also had a chance to discuss with the Rector of the East Timor University as well as with the Governor and the Assistant to the Governor. Their priorities were clearly specified by the Governor:
1. education
2. health and preventive medical care
3. agricultural development
4. development of infrastructure
5. good and honest administration of the local government

The Governor has invited the ecumenical family to start small-sized long-term agricultural projects in the island of Atauro which is primarily protestant and about 30 miles North of Dili; a motor boat can get there in an hour and a half. Our visit took place 20 days later than the Pope's visit to the island and it was very interesting to know that almost 200,000 people had waited for more than 4 hours and participated in the mass celebrated by the Pope. At the end 21 students chanted the slogan "Long live the Pope and self determination by the local people". Obviously the local police arrested these students and after 24 hours of their interrogation and detention, the Governor and the Rector of the University confirmed that they had been released. We tried to meet Bishop Velo but he has now intentionally moved to the eastern part of the island and it is very difficult to meet him in Dili.

During a night meeting with the Australian Ambassador we discussed about the future of the island and he confirmed a 100,000 US$ grant for East Timor's development. Due to our short visit we could not see many things although in comparison with my first visit in 1982 the infrastructure had improved very much; there were more people in the streets and more new houses built. All the political detainees in the island of Atauro have been released and sent where they wanted to but there are still no evidence nor confirmation of this fact.

I would like to propose the following items for our discussion:
1. Human rights violation and political struggle of East Timor for an autonomous administration are still subjects of discussion because these problems are pending; Indonesian soldiers with guns are observed elsewhere.
2. Having said this, the needs of the people are great: food, health care, education are absolutely necessities for the people in East Timor.

The rationale being that during my stay I wondered for how long can we postpone our engagement to respond to the basic needs of the people in East Timor: an engagement which was suspended because of the human rights violations and the Indonesia's integration policy.
For those questions I contemplated whether there is a possibility for us to advance the issue of human rights in East Timor at a different level and start now a kind of humanitarian aid for the people in East Timor.
After an 8 year moratorium by the ecumenical families the time has come for all of us to think if that was the right decision. I raise this issue to invite you all to give your opinions and comments. It is almost certain that there are around 200 freedom fighters in the eastern jungle living with their families. Day by day these so called guerrillas are killed by the Indonesian soldiers and these human being sacrifices are in the process of being forgotten.

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Asia Desk
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